C2: Mot as a Dying and Rising God

1. Mot’s death

According to the Ugaritic writings, the god Mot received sacrifices and was involved in agricultural rituals. At the same time, he is portrayed in the epic literature as a terrifying god of the netherworld who consumes the flesh of human beings and gods alike, bringing about their death.Owing to his role of presiding over the dead and the end of life, Mot was perfectly suited to serve as the murderer of Baal, the equivalent of the galla-demons in Mesopotamia, and of Seth in Egypt, who carried out the deaths of Dumuzi and Osiris, respectively.

Nevertheless, as the earliest Ugaritic scholars have discovered, Mot was also described as a dying god, and it was precisely he, and not Baal, whose killing is associated with agricultural work—a key attribute of the dying gods in the literature of the ancient Near East (d2). While in some ways this feature contradicts Mot’s description as dangerous and hostile, it still corresponds to his portrayal as dweller of the netherworld, the equivalent of Dumuzi and Osiris.Chapter A quoted the Church Fathers who described the sowing of the wheat grains in the field in connection with the death of Adonis / Tammuz, a practice that was known to Frazer and his contemporaries. Today, however, we also know of rituals from the second and first millennia BCE that attest to an older association between the killing of Dumuzi and Osiris, and agricultural work such as the harvesting of crops.

A Middle Egyptian ritual recorded in the *Egyptian Ramesseum Dramatic Papyrus*[[1]](#footnote-2) compares Osiris’s dismemberment by Seth to the act of harvest: After the grain is brought to the threshing floor, where it is threshed by oxen and donkeys, it is said that Osiris’s son Horus turns to Seth’s followers and asks: “Who is it who beats my father?” The reply states: “Beating Osiris, chopping of the god: Barley.” The text then interprets that the oxen that are used to thresh the grain represent Seth’s followers, while the donkeys represent Seth himself.

In another example, an Old Babylonian text describes [the agricultural?] workers’ families leaving for the steppe to gather crops.[[2]](#footnote-3) The place where they pile up the crops is called “the reed huts of Arali … at the place where the herald caught the lad.” Later on, the narrator appears to speak in the voice of a young, dying god: “My head you covered with the garment; my body you recovered with my new garment; my eyes...”

The aforementioned Arali is known as the place where Dumuzi used to tend his flock and whence he was eventually trapped and taken to netherworld. His words thus appear to reference the Mesopotamian funerary custom of dressing the corpse in clean clothes.[[3]](#footnote-4) As argued by its editors, the text as a whole seems to describe a ritual associated with Dumuzi’s death, symbolized by the harvest.

A later text from the Neo-Assyrian period additionally demonstrates the association between agricultural work and the killing of the god by comparing Dumuzi’s death to the grinding of grain: “His [de]ath is the roasted barley which they throw on behalf of Dumuzi when they grind him with stone…”[[4]](#footnote-5)

Similar to these rituals, the descriptions of Mot’s killing in Ugaritic literature are also related to the harvesting of crops. In the Baal Cycle they are mentioned twice: The first time is described as a response to Anat’s search for Baal. As stated earlier, Anat’s search for Baal or her success in finding him is told three times: First she finds him dead in the beautiful field of *Šḥlmmt*; next she asks Šapš to look for him in the netherworld; and finally she finds Mot instead of Baal. This last encounter eventually leads Anat to kill Mot in a way that simulates the practices of the grain harvest:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | 30She seizes |
|  | 31Mot, son of El; with a sword |
|  | 32she splits him,with a sieve she winnows |
|  | 33him, with fire she burns him, |
|  | 34with millstones she grinds him, in the field |
|  | 35she sows him. |

Excluding the use of the sword, which confirms the act of murder, the other verbs and nouns in this account belong to the semantic field of the grain harvest, each referring to a different operation involving grains: Sifting, roasting, grinding and sowing in the field. Yet instead of referring to the grains, they refer to Mot’s body, similar to the rituals cited above.

The second time that the author describes Mot’s death he inserts a quote by Mot who is accusing Baal of killing him:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | 11“On account of you, Baal, |
|  | 12I experienced abasement. On account of you, I experienced |
|  | 13winnowing with a sword.[[5]](#footnote-6) On account of you, |
|  | 14I experienced burning with fire. |
|  | 15On account of you, [I experienced grin]ding with millstones. |
|  | 16O[n account of you,] I experienced [winno]wing with a sifter |
|  | 17On account of you, I experienced withering[[6]](#footnote-7) |
|  | 18in the field. On account of you, I experienced |
|  | 19sowing in the sea” |

It bears emphasizing that in contrast to the early scholars’ conclusion,[[7]](#footnote-8) these portrayals of Mot’s killing cannot illuminate a certain function of Mot as a fertility deity, since he is ultimately considered as *the master* of the netherworld who brings death upon human beings. Likewise, the claim made by scholars that the entire description is metaphorical has no relation at all to the rituals from the ancient Near East mentioned above, and thus cannot be maintained either.[[8]](#footnote-9) It therefore appears that it is Mot’s very status as god of the netherworld that led the Levantine people to view him as analogous to the other denizens of the netherworld know in the writings of the ancient Near East. Similar to the rituals dedicated to Dumuzi and Osiris, these descriptions of Mot’s killing echo the local ritual that served as an etiology for Mot’s becoming the god of the netherworld.[[9]](#footnote-10)

*KTU* 1.23 reinforces the conjecture that in Ugarit, the agricultural rituals were linked to the enactment of Mot’s death. This text, in contrast to the Baal Cycle, belongs to the ritual genre. Although its precise purpose remains unclear, scholars agree that its most prominent theme is fertility. Some also emphasize the viticultural aspects of *KTU* 1.23, pointing to the relatively numerous references to the grapevine and its fruit.[[10]](#footnote-11) The performance in which Mot appears in ls. 8-11 of this text is also linked to the viticultural aspect of the ritual.

According to this performance, when the figure named *Mt-wšr* sits, the vine pruners prune (or are ordered to prune) him, bind him, and throw his tendrils to the ground, as in the following:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 8*Mt-wšr* sits; in his (one) hand a staff of bereavement, in his (other) hand |  |  |  |  |
| 9a staff of widowhood. The vine pruners prune him; |  |  |  |  |
| 10The vine binders bind him; They throw his tendrils |  |  |  |  |
| 11like a vine.[[11]](#footnote-12) |  |  |  |  |

The closing line of this section orders that these lines be recited seven times, and therefore it appears that no theatrical enactment of the scene is involved, but rather its recitation alone.[[12]](#footnote-13) Several scholars have disputed that the subject of the ritual is Mot the god of the netherworld, because the name *Mt-wšr* is not mentioned elsewhere as the appellation for Mot. Instead they suggested that *Mt-wšr* is an appellation for El, who is mentioned in the narrative part of *KTU* 1.23.[[13]](#footnote-14) However, this solution ignores the names of the two staffs held by the figure known as *Mt-wšr*—Bereavement and Widowhood—which symbolize the powers of the god of the netherworld to kill his victims,[[14]](#footnote-15) and which bear no connection to the role of El as the creator of gods and human beings alike. With respect to the meaning of the performance in these lines, scholars have searched for analogous magical ceremonies in the Bible as well as in the cultures of pre-modern societies.[[15]](#footnote-16) Such analogies, however, do little to contribute to the interpretation of the present performance. As the magical acts described here are chiefly agricultural in nature, they must be understood in this context. The pruning of tendrils is required (then as today) to revive the vine from its dormancy, enabling it to direct its energy to ripening fruit rather than to growing longer vines, and to synchronize the ripening of its grape clusters. After being pruned, the tendrils must be removed in order to let the fresh, young twigs grow, and to reduce the risk of disease. The remaining tendrils are attached to supports that they climb, further contributing to an increase in the vine’s yield, as well as preventing decay and insect infestation.[[16]](#footnote-17) The performance cited above seems to relate, in the form of a ritual, to such viticultural activities.

We therefore have another agricultural ritual that, while its goal ultimately benefits humankind, consists of ‘violent’ deeds that render the image of killing the ascending god. Since in Ugarit, Mot was considered as the denizen of the netherworld, he has become the object of this ritual. In contrast, Baal was never considered as a netherworld inhabitant in Ugarit, but rather as the god who dies and then returns to life.

1. Mot as a ‘rising’ god

The Ugaritic Baal Cycle is the only known source regarding Mot’s resurrection, although the description is very concise—whether due to the broken lines, or because the author of the Baal Cycle did not elaborate on it. Still, the lines that survived from the beginning and end of the description imply that Mot’s resurrection was indeed described in the Baal Cycle. Since Mot was dismemberment into pieces, his resurrection appears to occur first as the fusion of his body parts, as implied in the two opening lines of this procedure immediately following the description of his killing:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | 35His body – the birds did not eat; |
|  | 36His parts – the fowls did not devour;[[17]](#footnote-18) |
|  | 37The pieces of his flesh calling aloud[[18]](#footnote-19) each other. |

The next forty lines are broken, therefore no further description regarding Mot’s resurrection can be deciphered. Nevertheless, Mot’s reunion with Baal at the end of seven years indicates that he has indeed reappeared:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 7From [d]ays to months, from months |  |
| 8to years. [Th]en in the seventh |  |
| 9year, Mot the son of El […] |  |
| 10with/to mighty Baal. He raises |  |
| 11his voice and declares: … |  |

Due to the fact the Mot’s resurrection is described only in the Baal Cycle, and in light of his function as a god of the netherworld, it is difficult to know whether this is an independent tradition borrowed uniquely here, or a new theme created initially by the author of the Baal Cycle. On the one hand, since the author’s fondness for symmetry between his protagonists is apparent from the first part of the Cycle, it is not plausible that he sought to parallel Baal’s description with that of Mot as a god of the netherworld.[[19]](#footnote-20) On the other hand, in light of Baal’s identification with the Egyptian god Seth during that period, which held in Egypt and the Levant alike,[[20]](#footnote-21) it is not inconceivable that Baal’s enemy—Mot the god of the netherworld—was identified with Seth’s enemy, Osiris, who was dismembered by Seth and became a dweller of the netherworld only after the fusion of his parts.[[21]](#footnote-22) It is even possible that the identification between the gods is conveyed in Mot’s appellation in *KTU* 1.23 as *Mt-wšr* (l. 8), which may be interpreted as an alphabetical writing of the Egyptian name Osiris - *wsir*.[[22]](#footnote-23) Whatever the source of the description of Mot’s resurrection—a parallel to the resurrection of Baal, or a borrowing from the Egyptian description of the fusion of Osiris’s parts in the netherworld—the very existence of this description in the Baal Cycle reinforces the claim that the idea of resurrection was familiar to the Cycle’s author.

1. Conclusions

The discussion of the Baal Cycle and other Ugaritic texts reveals that despite the objections raised by modern scholars, the Baal Cycle’s author was well acquainted with the four common motifs of the dying gods traditions: The death, the search, the lament, and the association with agricultural rituals. These elements were familiar to the author, who used them as the basis for his new plot about the struggle between Baal and Mot. In addition to these, another tradition was at the author’s disposal, one regarding the rising god pattern alone: The disappearance of the rain and its return. This too is embedded in the new story about the struggle between Baal and Mot. While these elements do not constitute the main point of the Baal Cycle—neither in the first nor second part—the author’s dependence on them indicates how popular and common these were in Ugarit. Moreover, while some of the duplications, contradictions, and inconsistencies occurring in the second part of the cycle stem from the incompatibility of these traditions with the account of the struggle between the gods; others stem from the contradictory traditions with which the author was familiar. Thus, despite the relative paucity of finds from Ugarit and the Levant of the second millennium BCE, the above philological discussion clearly indicates the presence of a variety of dying and rising gods traditions in Ugarit.

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. For the text and further details of the ritual, see... [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. For the unexpected description of Nergal as a young, dying god, see…. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Gabbay suggests associating this act with the rising of Dumuzi. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Since winnowing with a sword is implausible, the text appears to be the result of haplography or line exchange. Originally, the winnowing was related to the sifter, and the dismemberment to the sword. Greenstein 1982, 202-204, maintains, on the other hand, that this is a random occurrence leading to cumulative impact rather than a series of sequential events. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. The meaning of *ġ-l-y* as “to wither” follows... For reservations, see... [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. The first to propose this view was Cassuto in 1941/1942 (translated into English in 1962), who argued that since Anat’s actions do not have any agricultural meaning, this is unlikely to refer to a grain ritual (for reservations regarding this position, see Healey 1983). Following this line of thought, Loewenstamm 1962 compared Mot’s killing with the account of the shattering of the golden calf in Exodus 32, which contains the roots *ś-r-p*, *ṭ-ḥ-n*, and *z-r-r*, and contends that both cases are a depiction of the destruction of deities. See further… However, while the biblical verbs closely correspond to the Ugaritic ones (cf. also Sura 29:97), they relate to all type of material, including statues. The Ugaritic verbs, on the other hand—in particular *ṭḥnbrḥm, dry* and *drʿ*—pertain exclusively to grain/crops. Nevertheless, although Loewenstamm’s argument—which many have found convincing—fails to explain the description of Mot’s death; it may explain how the roots found in Exodus have been influenced by this tradition: see Greenstein 2011, 506–8. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. A distant echo of this etiology is found in the writings of Philo of Byblos, who told of Mouth (Μoὺθ), son of Elos-Kronos, who died in his childhood, was sanctified, “and the Phoenicians call this one Thanatos and Pluto.” The Greek spelling /ou/in the name of Mouth reflects the Phoenician shift of Moth>Mouth. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. In addition, Schloen 1993, 217–218 has suggested linking the ambiguous term *mštˁltm*, mentioned in the narrative section with Hebrew עוללות (Aram: עוללתא) “gleaning [of grapes and olives].” In light of all these references, it has been suggested that the ritual may be related to a ceremony that took place during the month of “the Beginning of the Wine” (*rˀišyn*), documented in *KTU* 1.41/1.87. The date of that month, however, is still unclear. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. The lexeme *šdmt*, occurring also in the Hebrew Bible, is dubious in both corpora. Its derivation is unknown, and therefore it can only be interpreted based on context. Smith 2016, 45, discusses the two main theories among scholars: ‘terrace’ and ‘tendrils, shoots.’ The translation offered here follows… [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. See further discussion in Smith 2006, 50. Perhaps this ceremony was performed at the feast as an imitation of the agricultural activity that took place in the vineyard. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. As evidence, it was argued that in the narrative part, El is described as having a staff—a metaphor for his penis. According to the proposal of Fischer-Elfert, a literal Egyptian translation of the compound name [*Mt*]-*wŠr*might be found in Leiden I 343 + I 345 as [*Mt*] *ḥnˁŠr* (= *Mt* and *Šr*). Other commentators read it, however, as “[*Bˁr*] (=Baal) and (the Syrian goddess, his spouse) Šala.” [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. The lament of Babylon in Isaiah 47: 8 testifies to the continuity of this tradition in the Levant. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Thus, it has been linked with the “circumcision” of trees (ערלה) à la the biblical law in Lev. 19:23–25. Another suggestion associates it with the customs of the Zambian people. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. I am grateful to the agronomist and vinedresser X… for his clarifications. For ancient descriptions of such activities (although later than the Ugaritic material), see e.g.,… These activities take place during the late winter, perhaps suggesting the time of this ritual as a whole. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Most commentators interpret the Ugaritic preposition *l* here as an asseverative*l*, thus reading the sentence as a positive statement: “the birds consume his body.” [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. This translation understands the verb as deriving from *ṣ-w-ḥ*. Margalit suggests a translation based on the Arabic *ṣaḥḥa*. Pardee associates it with the Syrian Arabic root *n-ṣ-ḥ*. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. The author’s predilection for symmetry is evinced in the first section of the *Cycle* in comparison to other versions of the Storm-god vs. the Sea. Thus, while other cognate works follow the Storm-God’s victory over Sea with an account of the erection of his palace, the Ugaritic author alone asserts that a palace was built also for Yamm, his antagonist. Similarly, while in the analogous myths, the Storm-God defeats Sea on his own; in the Baal Cycle the defeat of Yamm is attributed to Anat as well. The story of Baal’s descent to the netherworld seems to follow the same pattern: Just as Baal dies and comes back to life, so too does his antagonist Mot; just as Baal eventually defeats Mot, so does his ally Anat. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. For the pre-Ptolemaic details of the Osirianmyth, attested mainly in the funerary texts and magical papyri, see... [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. The pronunciation of the Egyptian name of Osiris as *wsir* was first suggested by.. . For reservations, see... The Semitic languages rendered the Egyptian s as both *š* and *s*: see... [↑](#footnote-ref-23)